

[Music of the Month: Strandline](#)



**Robert Finley**  
*Black Bayou*  
Easy Eye Sound

**Bobby Rush**  
*All My Love for You*  
Deep Rush/Thirty Tigers

Reviews by George De Stefano

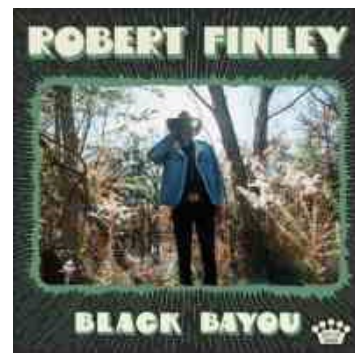
With albums released in late 2023, two veteran and venerable artists, Robert Finley and Bobby Rush, affirm the vitality of the blues and their eminence as exemplars of an idiom often considered legacy, as influence, but not a living style. Finley, 70, and Rush, 90, put paid to that notion on *Black Bayou* and *All My Love for You*. Their latest works demonstrate how the blues, far from being a music of sorrow and suffering, speaks to the whole range of human experience. Tribulation and troubles? Yes, and both can deeply move a listener with their sad songs. But their albums also are ribald, even raunchy, reveling in the frank sexuality of the blues. There's also humor, wisdom, braggadocio, and resilience. In other words, all of life.

The similarities between Finley and Rush are striking. They were born in northern Louisiana small towns, Finley in Winnsboro, but raised mostly in Bernice; Rush outside of Homer, in Claiborne Parish. (Finley still lives in Bernice; Rush, after thirty years in Chicago, relocated to Jackson, Mississippi, where he currently lives.) They grew up under the South's apartheid system and escaped it through an Army stint (Finley) and extensive travels (both). From poor families, they were forced as children to work in arduous, even life-threatening conditions. They've struggled to make a living with their music. Finley, who had worked as a carpenter until he became legally blind from glaucoma, made his first album in 2016 after decades of performing. For both men, recognition and success came late in life. (Rush won his first GRAMMY when he was 83.) And while the blues is their fundamental point of reference, they also bring the funk, soul, R&B, and rock to the mix.

*Black Bayou* and *All My Love for You* are sonic siblings, too; earthy and direct, the albums have the immediacy of live

performances, with little studio embellishment. Besides being great singers, Finley and Rush are fine guitarists (Rush is also a terrific harp player in the Sonny Boy Williamson style). They front first-rate bands with guitars, keyboards, bass, and in-the-pocket drumming. Rush's self-produced record has a fuller, sprightlier sound, with horns and string synths on several tracks, while Finley's, produced by Black Keys guitarist Dan Auerbach, is all unadorned, swamp funk, guitar-driven stories from down home.

Recorded at Auerbach's Easy Eye Sound Studio in Nashville, *Black Bayou* is the fourth Finley-Auerbach collaboration, following *Murder Ballads* (2017), *Goin' Platinum* (2017), and *Sharecropper's Son* (2021). (Finley's 2016 debut, *Age Don't Mean a Thing*, was produced by Bruce Watson, who steered the record more toward soul than blues.) It's also their most satisfying project to date, with Auerbach's deft and least obtrusive production, Finley's gripping, emotive vocals, and simple, straightforward songwriting that maps physical and emotional geography. The album's eleven tracks were written in the studio by Finley, Auerbach, and band members Kenny Brown (guitars), Eric Deaton (bass), drummers Patrick Carney (Auerbach's Black Keys partner) and Jeffrey Clemens. Christy Johnson and La Quindrelyn McMahan, Finley's daughter and granddaughter, provide backup vocals that dip into soul, gospel, and doo-wop. Finley, Auerbach, the band, and singers created their parts spontaneously and cut everything in one take.



Finley has toured extensively, first with an Army band and later as an opening act for the Black Keys and the blues-rock band Greta Van Fleet before becoming a headliner. But he's remained rooted in Bernice; on *Black Bayou*, he tells us that city living is a "Waste of Time." The album's vivid portraits of life in his hometown, its characters, dramas, and folkways, give it a thematic unity. *Murder Ballads*, Finley's and Auerbach's first project, was the soundtrack to a graphic novel of the same name and was packaged with it. *Black Bayou's* North Mississippi tales could just as well be translated to ink and paper.



On the poignant soul ballad "Nobody Wants to be Lonely," Finley recounts a visit to a friend living in an "old folks home" who asks "when I'm coming back again." Finley's vocal, with a soaring falsetto that Al Green might envy, renders the pathos of his friend's loneliness and his recognition that he may face the same future: "My best years are

behind me/because of my age." But he tells his lover he's determined to "try to be strong/Even if I have to do it all alone."

Finley says the song came from his experience playing for institutionalized elderly forgotten by their families. "Their kids drop them off and go with their lives. I go down occasionally and perform at the old folks home in Bernice. Just take my guitar and play for thirty minutes or so, try to get them to dance, try to bring some joy to them."



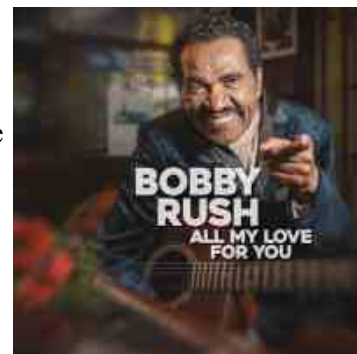
The slinky swamp funk of "Miss Kitty" is as seductive as the titular character, a "good girl bad girl comin' to town to rock your world." As Finley calls her name, working that irresistible falsetto, the guitars envelop him, the backing vocalists go "shoop shoop," and keyboards, bass, and drums lay down a Booker T and the MGs groove. "Gospel Blues" finds Finley contemplating the afterlife, "hanging out with the great Jehovah." Backed by Auerbach's slide guitar and country blues harmonica, Finley dreams about Heaven but knows that to get there, 'you gotta go through Hell every now and then."



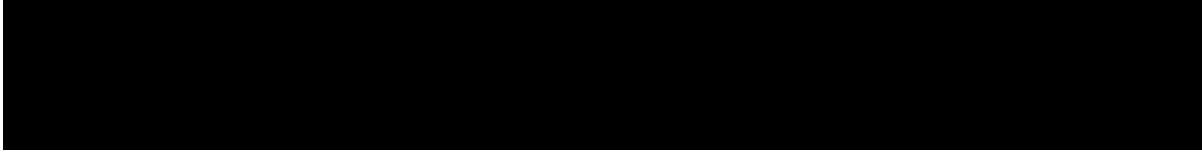
There's not a duff track on *Black Bayou*; even when the lyrics milk clichés ("What Goes Around (Comes Around)," "Livin' Out a Suitcase"), Finley and the band elevate the material. The last track, "Alligator Bait," is the album's most autobiographical, based on a terrifying experience from his childhood. It opens with Finley advising a visitor to the bayou to "put on your swamp boots, baby/We goin' for a ride/down by Black Bayou/bring your camera, baby/we might see an alligator or crocodile." Finley the tour guide then takes us back to his boyhood when his grandfather used him as literal bait for swamp gators. Over a mid-tempo groove and riffing guitars, Finley recalls, "I stepped on a log and the log moved/And I didn't know what to do/ so my Grandpa said/Boy, you stepped on a alligator back." "Lotta kids got ate like that," Finley laconically observes. But not him –when the gator moves, Grandpa shoots it." Boy, you did good," he tells his grandson. When an indignant Robert complains to his father about "this lowdown thing that my grandpa did," he just laughs and says "'Boy, the thing Grandpa did to you/When I was a little lad/ he did to me too."

After the harrowing encounter with the gator, Robert declares, "You can't get me back to the swamp/Far as I'm gon' go is to that oak tree stump/That's where they skinned the gator/That's where we all sit there and ate her." The lesson learned? "I coulda got ate/They used me for alligator bait/That's why I don't hunt today."


Like Finley, Bobby Rush (born Emmett Ellis, Jr. in 1933) grew up in the rural Deep South and was put to work as a child on his family's farm. His first instrument was a diddy bow that he built on the side of the family house out of broom wire, nails, bottles, and bricks. At age eleven, he started playing a proper guitar. On weekends, he escaped the fields and found the blues in juke joints. After his family moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1948, the teenage Rush decided to pursue a career in the blues. He became a jobbing musician, performing in clubs and juke joints in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi before settling in Chicago in the 1950s. In Pine Bluff and Chicago, he sought out and befriended blues legends Elmore James, Little Walter, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf. The singles he made for Chess, ABC, and Philadelphia International and a rigorous touring schedule to rival Bob Dylan's established his reputation with blues cognoscenti. In 1971, Rush made it onto the national charts with his funk-blues single "Chicken Heads." After relocating to Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1980s, he began to reach new, broader (i.e., whiter) audiences, appearing in two notable documentaries, the Martin Scorsese-produced [The Road to Memphis](#) and [Take Me to the River](#). In 2021, he published his autobiography, [I Ain't Studdin' Ya: My American Blues Story](#).



Rush got his first Grammy nomination for *Hoochie Man* (2000) and was nominated again for *Down in Louisiana* (2014) and for *Decisions* (2015). He won in 2017 for his twenty-fifth studio album, *Porcupine Meat*, which featured guest artists Dave Alvin, Joe Bonamassa, and Keb' Mo'. The Recording Academy of the United States bestowed another gilded gramophone trophy in 2020 for *Rawer Than Raw*, an acoustic blues set mixing Rush's songs and covers of Elmore James, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Sonny Boy Williamson.

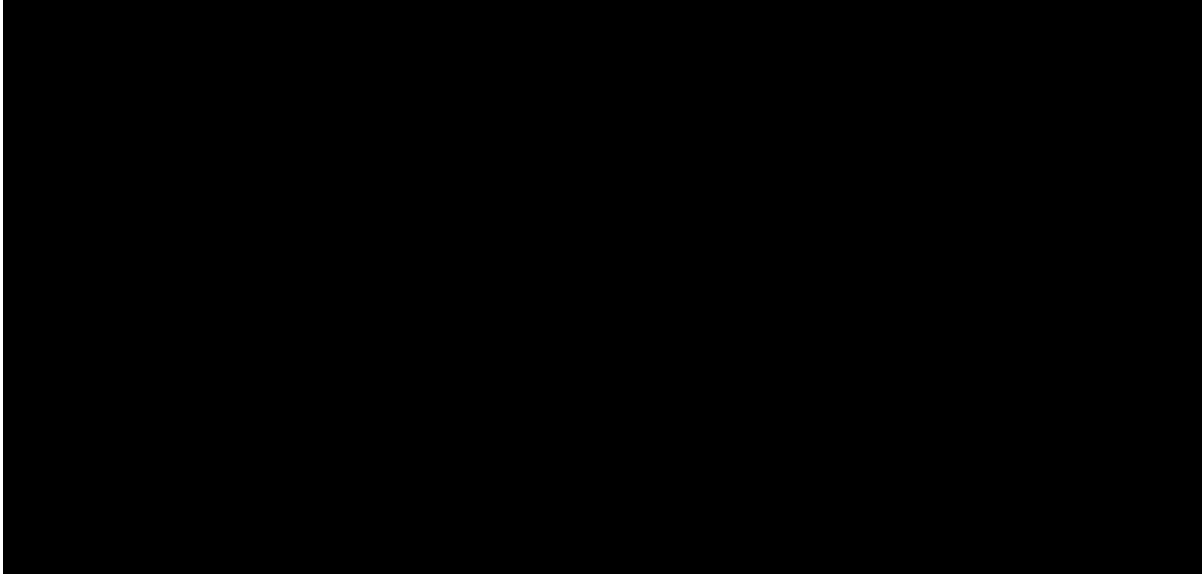


His latest, *All My Love for You*, comprises 10 Rush original compositions, but originality isn't their strong suit. Rush is more of a blues classicist, a bearer and upholder of tradition, than an innovator. His songs often allude to or quote from other artists and compositions. His harp solo on "I'm Free" is based on the gospel standard "Wade in the Water." "Running In and Out" recalls John Lee Hooker's "Boom Boom." The shade of Muddy Waters haunts "I'll Do Anything for You"; "I Can't Stand It" is based on Ann Peebles' "I Can't Stand the Rain." "TV Mama" takes not only its title from the Big Joe Turner-Elmore James number but lifts the song's line, "she's my TV mama, one with the big, wide screen." On "I'm the One," he proclaims his blues bona fides and brags about having "put the funk in the blues." (Some New Orleans musicians might dispute that.) But the song is unmistakably modeled on Willie Dixon's "Seventh Son," right down to the "I'm the one" refrain.



Rush even offers an answer song to one of his older tracks. "One Monkey Can Stop a Show" revises "One Monkey Don't Stop No Show," a 1995 R&B number about a woman leaving Rush because of his philandering. In the new song, he pledges to change his ways—not because he's had a change of heart but from fear of death, voodoo curses, and castration.

Still, if often derivative, Rush's songs are well-crafted, catchy, and infused with his no-nonsense, good-humored, and raunchy sensibility. The best blues singers can make old tropes and themes fresh through the force of personality or a vivid persona, and Rush, at his best, does exactly that. What's really amazing, though, is his singing. He recorded *All My Love for You* when he was a year or so shy of ninety, yet he sounds like a man half his age and younger than Robert Finley, twenty years his junior. Bobby Rush says he and his contemporary Buddy Guy are the oldest bluesmen still working. But age is about the last thing you'll hear in Rush's vibrant and vital performances.





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